



What works? What fails?

FINDINGS FROM THE NAVRONGO COMMUNITY
HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING PROJECT



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Navrongo Health Research Centre

WHAT'S ON A SOOTHSAYER'S MIND?

Contrary to long-held beliefs, the Soothsayer who may also double as diviner, sorcerer or healer, can play a crucial role in health care delivery. As the CHFP scales up across the district under CHPS, can the integration of the Soothsayer into the system be explored to improve emergency obstetric care? *What works...* sat with Abing-ya Atasige, a renowned Soothsayer, who opened his mouth and allowed us to see what's on his mind...

Good morning sir. We are interested in learning more about your work so we are here to witness a typical soothsaying session and ask a few questions. What would you say is your profession?

I am a soothsayer.

As a soothsayer, what do you do?

I unravel mysteries, predict the future and solve people's problems.

What issues generally bring people here?

All manner of issues ranging from health, social, economic and political. The oracle may be asked to explain a calamity or mishap or predict the future of a person or event.

How much do you charge for consultation?

Nothing. It's free. Soothsaying is service to humanity. The client offers what he or she can afford.

What do people normally bring along when coming to consult?

It could be chicken, millet or money.

Is there any similarity between a sick person who seeks medical attention at the hospital and another who consults the Soothsayer?

In both cases there are procedures to follow—at the soothsayer's you have to come and 'greet' before you consult the diviner. At the hospital you first obtain a card before you see the medical doctor.

What do you think is the main difference between the two?

Through the hospital system people can become rich. I don't know of anyone who became rich as a soothsayer. You may be given some gifts for helping to solve someone's problem but that is once in a long while. At the hospital you may have to pay before a service is rendered, at the Soothsayer's you get what you want first before the issue about payment comes up.

Have you ever attended hospital?

No, never.

Have you never been taken ill before?

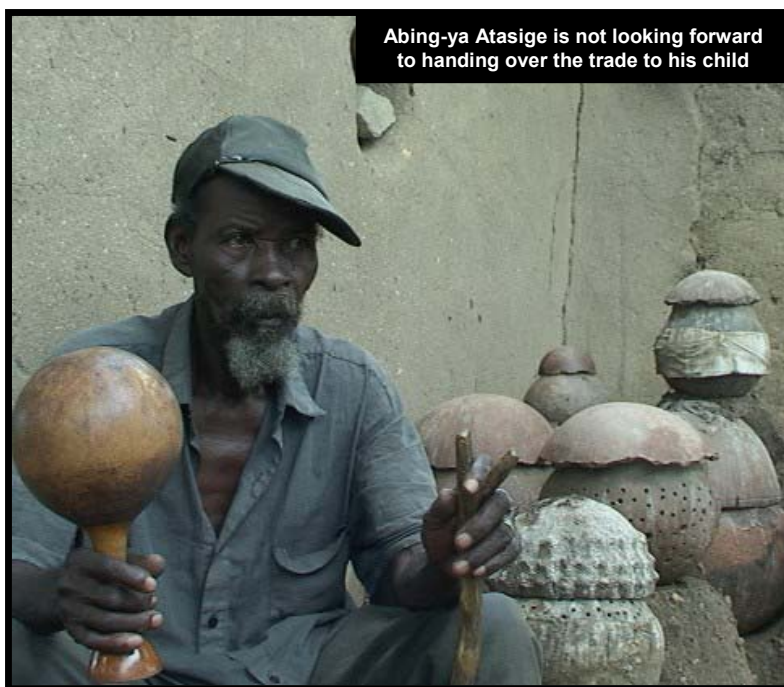
I have fallen ill but I have never attended the hospital. The trade I ply serves my purposes so I have never had to attend hospital.

Would you rather a sick person attends the hospital or comes to consult you?

It does not really matter—if a person falls sick and attends hospital and does not get the desired relief the person can come to me. On the other hand, if the person consults me first and has not been cured he or she can continue at the hospital and may get the needed treatment.

Is the hospital a major threat to the survival of your trade?

Not at all. They complement, not contradict one another.



Abing-ya Atasige is not looking forward to handing over the trade to his child

What happens when someone comes to consult but has nothing to offer?

After consultation you just walk away! It is as simple as that. But usually what ever you have, you put it down first before consultation begins.

Does that not expose the system to corruption? Suppose someone offers 2000 and another offers 10,000 cedis—won't the oracle be more favourably disposed towards the one who offers more?

No. It does not work like that. It is not a cash and carry system. The oracle knows it is all about service to humanity and everyone offers what he or she can afford. As long as it comes from your heart, whatever you offer is acceptable.

What is the most ideal time for consultation?

Consultation is on first-come-first-served basis so it has become usual for people to come here at dawn with the purpose of avoiding a long queue which may start to build up by sunrise. But in principle the oracle is on call 24 hours a day.

Has there been an instance when someone brought a problem that was bigger than the oracle could handle?

Yes, that happens. In that case the person will have to decide where to turn to next

Can the oracle go out of its way to refer a case to some particular specialist?

Yes it happens. The oracle can direct that a particular problem may be better handled at such and such a place so you should try your luck there.

Has the oracle ever referred someone to the hospital?

Yes. The oracle can say this disease can only be treated at the hospital so seek treatment there. That happens.

How long does a typical soothsaying session last?

It all depends on the nature of the problem for which consultation is being sought. If you are able to state your case clearly and fast, diagnosis is quick and before long your prescriptions are ready.

What would you say is your first line drug for malaria?

Well, that is common knowledge—boil Nim tree leaves for the patient to bath and drink. You may also use the bitter water to prepare vegetable soup for the person.

How about measles?

Measles has been a particularly bad disease. We usually recommend immediate immunization for the other children.

How is the immunization done?

You count the number of children in the compound and you give that number of groundnut seeds to the measles patient. He closes the seeds tightly in his or her palm until the seeds become wet with the sweat then you offer a seed each to the other children to chew and swallow. They would get an attack, usually a mild one. Then they would develop a resistance.

Do you still do it now?

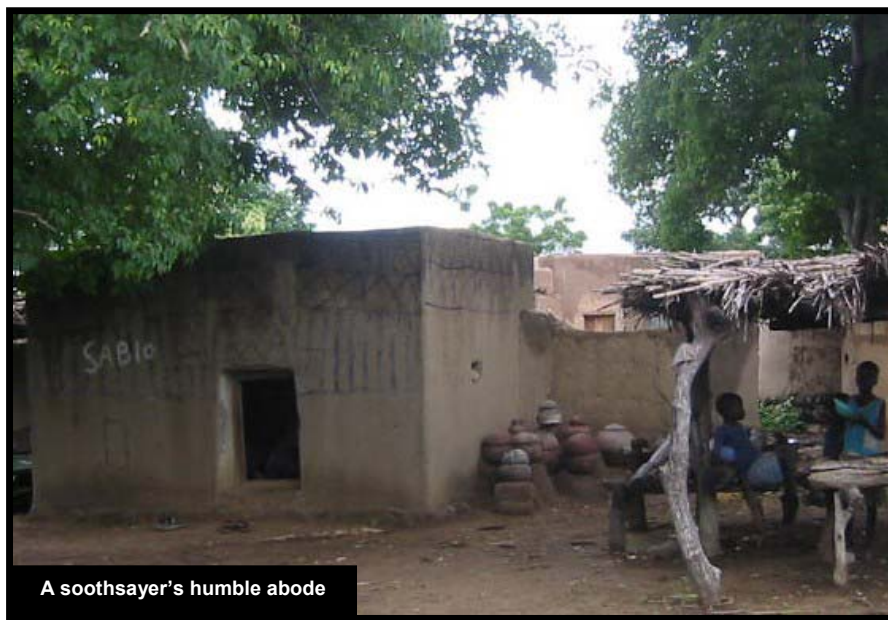
No, we don't. I think measles has been wiped out now.

Do you think there would come a time soothsayers will be rare to find?

Yes that is possible but it will take a long time. People still come to us after medical science has failed them and they get the desired relief.

Would you be kind enough to train me to become a Soothsayer?

No. It's a difficult but thankless job. In any case, no one trains to become a soothsayer—it's an oracle's call.



A soothsayer's humble abode

Send questions or comments to: What works? What fails?

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